Shedding Light On Usenet Newsgroups

By Kevin M. Savetz

'Net news is big news these days. Internet guru Kevin Savetz explains how to access Usenet newsgroups via America Online, Delphi and UNIX access providers.

Shared by millions of people on the global Internet network, Usenet is the largest distributed bulletin board system in the world. People on Usenet talk about everything imaginable, from human rights and antique autos to Monty Python and Noam Chomsky. Usenet is simply the largest, most active and most varied discussion forum in the world. With so many conversations going on (at last count, there were some 8,000 distinct topics), there is truly something here for everyone.

Every day, 25 million people in 200 countries access the Internet to exchange electronic mail and files and to communicate on Usenet. Usenet is like a cork bulletin board in a busy room: Anyone who's interested can read the messages on the board and (if so inclined) can post a note there, too. But unlike a cork bulletin board or even an ordinary electronic one, messages on Usenet can be read by millions of people all over the globe.

One of the questions most frequently asked by new users is how to use Usenet. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer, because the steps you need to take depend on which service you're using to access Usenet.

If you wanted to use Usenet in the days of old (if you consider 1990 the olden days), you had to find an Internet service provider, and you probably had to learn how to use the klunky UNIX operating system, too. Today, commercial online services are making it much easier for all of us to participate. Two major online services, America Online and Delphi, currently offer Usenet to their customers. Instead of fussing with UNIX, you can now use slick, menu-driven interfaces to explore the wonderful world of Usenet. (CompuServe and Prodigy users, don't despair--your services are gearing up to offer Usenet soon.)

Of course, you can still use good old UNIX through an Internet service provider to access Usenet. This article will explain how to get started with Usenet using America Online, Delphi and UNIX.

Usenet Defined

Usenet discussions are divided by topic: There's **rec.pets.cats** for cat-lovers, **comp.sys.mac.wanted** for those who want to buy and sell used Macintoshes, **sci.astro** for astronomy buffs, plus about 8,000 other topics, with new ones added every week.

Usenet goes by many names. The folks at America Online seem to prefer the term "newsgroups," but Delphi calls it Usenet. Other common names for Usenet include Net news, Internet news, or sometimes just news. But don't let the word "news" mislead you: very little of what's in Usenet is like the news you'll find in the Sunday paper or on CNN. Instead, you'll see messages from people discussing and arguing about every conceivable topic. Newsgroups are organized hierarchically by name: **rec.pets.cats,** for example, is a recreational topic group about pets and specifically focuses on cats. As you might imagine, there are other **rec.pets** newsgroups, such as **rec.pets.dogs** and **rec.pets.rabbits**.

America Online

America Online (AOL) has done its part to make Usenet as easy as possible to use. AOL offers copious, online documentation, a blissfully simple graphical interface and lots of interactive help. Using Usenet has never been so easy.

To begin, log on to America Online and use the **keyword** command to jump to **Newsgroups.** The Newsgroups screen is the center of operations for reading and posting to Usenet. *(See Figure 1.)*

With over 8,000 discussion topics, it's easy to become overwhelmed with the amount of information available and the chatter going on. It's important, then, to be able to filter out the newsgroups that don't interest you. America Online can keep a list of newsgroups that you find interesting so that it's easy to peruse only those topics that you want to read about.

Start with the **Search All Newsgroups** button. When you click on it, you'll be asked to key in the words that describe the topic that you're interested in. Type a couple of words (such as **sports and hockey**), and you'll be shown a list of newsgroups

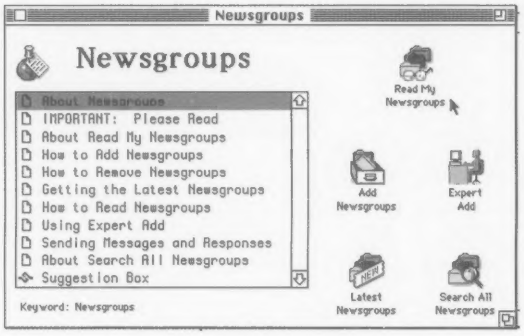

Figure 1: AOL's newgroups

that match your interest. Click on one of the newsgroup names and then select **View Description** to learn more about the newsgroup. The on-screen **Add** button adds a highlighted group to your list of interesting newsgroups. *(See Figure 2.)*

Figure 2: Searching for newsgroup titles

Notice the button with the question mark on it. These help buttons are located throughout America Online's newsgroup area. If you're ever unsure about what to do, just hit the ? key.

There are three other ways to search the newsgroup list. From the Newsgroups screen, you can click on **Add Newsgroups**. This method allows you to search by the newsgroups' organizational names. For example, you can look at a list of all of the **rec.pets** newsgroups. *(See Figure 3.)* Or, because newsgroups are added daily, select **Latest Newsgroups** from the Newsgroups screen to see which new ones are available. Finally, if you already know the exact name of the newsgroup that you're interested in (such as **alt.internet.services**, one of my favorites), you can use the **Expert Add** button from the Newsgroups screen to quickly add it to your list of newsgroups.

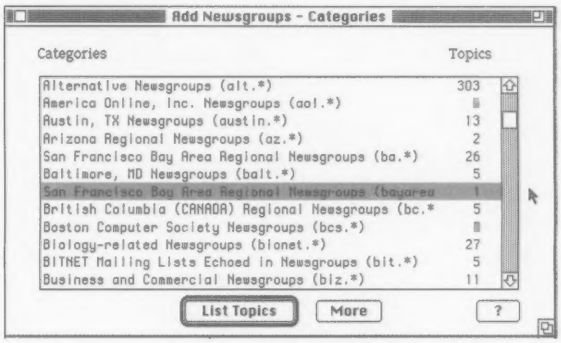
Add Newsgroups - Categories
Categories
Topics
Alternative Newsgroups (alt.*) 303
America Online, Inc. Newsgroups (aol.*)
Austin, TX Newsgroups (austin.*) 13
Arizona Regional Newsgroups (az.*) 2
San Francisco Bay Area Regional Newsgroups (ba.*) 26
Baltimore, MD Newsgroups (balt.*) 5
San Francisco Bay Area Regional Newsgroups (bayarea 1
British Columbia (CANADA) Regional Newsgroups (bc.* 5
Boston Computer Society Newsgroups (bcs.*)
Biology-related Newsgroups (bionet.*) 27
BITNET Mailing Lists Echoed in Newsgroups (bit.*) 5
Business and Commercial Newsgroups (biz.*) 11
List Topics
More
?

Figure 3: Adding newsgroups

Once you've added some newsgroups to your list, you can start reading messages. After you've selected them, reading newsgroups is just like reading messages on other AOL conferences. Select **Read My Newsgroups** from the Newsgroups screen. There you'll see a list of the newsgroups that you've designated as "interesting." Highlight one newsgroup and select **List Unread** for a list of new messages in that group. Then just double-click on a message and read. *(See Figure 4.)*

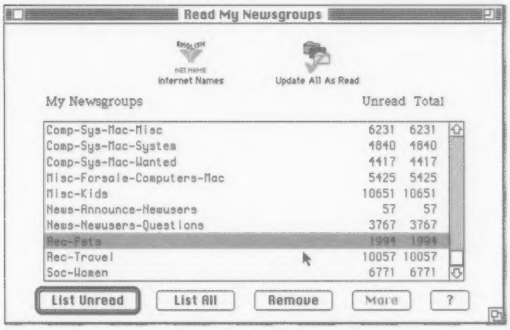

Figure 4: Reading newsgroups

Once you've been reading "news" for a few days, you might want to speak up by posting your own messages to Usenet. Posting a message is just like sending electronic mail—select a topic, type a subject line, and then fill in your message. To do so, open the newsgroup that you wish to contribute to and press the **Send New Message** button.

America Online costs $9.95 per month for up to five hours of use. Additional time is $3.50 per hour. For more information, call 1-800-827-6364.

Delphi

Delphi, another national online service, also offers access to Usenet (as well as to many other Internet tools). Delphi's text-based interface isn't as slick as America Online's graphical interface, but it's easy to use nonetheless and has the added benefit of providing Usenet access to any computer with a modem—not just Macs and PCs with Windows. I access Delphi with my Mac, and I know someone who accesses it at 300 bps with an old Atari 800. Now that's diversity!

From Delphi's main menu, type **Internet** to get you to the Internet special interest group area: This is Delphi's diving board to all Internet services. From there, type **Usenet** to move to Usenet's news area.

```
                THE INTERNET
              SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP
Helping you connect to everywhere!
About the Internet Help
Conference                                    Exit
Databases (Files)
EMail                                         FTP
Forum (Messages)                              Gopher
Guides (Books)              IRC-Internet Relay Chat
Register/Cancel                               Telnet
Who's Here     Utilities (finger, traceroute, ping)
Workspace                       Usenet Newsgroups

Internet SIG>Enter your selection: Usenet
```

From there, you'll see the Usenet menu. With a little experimentation, you'll find that reading news with Delphi is very simple and that there's lots of online help to guide you on your way. Delphi's Usenet menu is divided into three sections: The top group includes help and newsgroup access files, the middle section allows you to search for newsgroups that interest you, and the bottom section is a long list of selected newsgroups that the Delphi editors think you'll find especially interesting.

```
[Example: Delphi's Usenet menu]
Usenet Discussion Groups
1 PERSONAL FAVORITES                                    Menu
2 Access Any Newsgroup (by typing its name)             Usenet
3 DELPHI Newsreader Help                                Text
4 READ BEFORE POSTING TO ANY NEWSGROUP!!!!              Text
5 New User Topics and FAQS (NEW USERS, START HERE!)     Menu
6 How to Create Signature, edit Personal Favorites      Text
7 How to Create New Newsgroups (FAQs)                   Menu
8 Usenet FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions files)        Menu
9 Other Usenet servers (by gopher)                      Menu
10 DELPHI Command Summary                               Menu
11                                                      Text
12 ==NEWSGROUP LISTS ==                                 Text
13 Search for Newsgroups and Mailing Lists              Menu
14 Newsgroup Lists (Delphi list: 6/08/94, others: 06/02/94)  Menu
15                                                      Text
16=SELECTED NEWSGROUPS==                                Text
17 Best of Internet (alt.best.of.internet)              Usenet
18 Commercial Online Services (alt.online-service)      Usenet
19 Computer Underground Digest (comp.society.cu-digest) Usenet
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```
20 Computer Viruses & Security (moderated) (comp.virus) Usenet
21 Cryptography (sci.crypt)                              Usenet
22 Cyberspace (alt.cyberspace)                           Usenet
23 DELPHI, as Others See Us (alt.online-service.delphi)  Usenet
24 Electronic Frontier Foundation News (comp.org.eff.news)  Usenet
25 Electronic Frontier Foundation Talk (comp.org.eff.talk)Usenet
```

Let's look at **alt.internet.services**, a newsgroup filled with lots of great information about the Internet itself. Once you've entered your choice, you'll find yourself in Delphi's news reader. The program tells you how many new messages have arrived since you last read the newsgroup. I had never read this newsgroup before, so I found more than 850 messages in over 400 distinct discussions! You will then be asked which message you want to read. I picked **unread**, because I wanted to see what was new. Next, you'll see a list of new messages within that newsgroup.

```
Internet Services (alt.internet.services)

853 messages have been posted in the last 14 days; You've
read none of them.

Select which messages: Unread, All, Date or ?> unread
Internet Services
Page 1 of 23 [853 messages in 426 discussion threads]

1 Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Sources on the
Internet     (1 of 3)
2 FAQ: International E-mail accessibility
3 The CMU Internet Billing Service (9 msgs)
4 Media List Update, 5/28/94
5 Internet project - help needed (3 msgs)
6 Chicago Coalition for Information Access (3 msgs)
7 Looking for info on internet regulatory issues (5 msgs)
8 Free-Net
9 Searching for Net Access
10 Internet Access
11 Help with Mosaic (for Windows) (2 msgs)
12 Non-Profit Internet Access for under $10/mon
13 CHANGE TEXT EDITORS (6 msgs)
14 How does WWW work? (2 msgs)
15 crl.com
16 A@G News from Russia #58 (Summary) (2 msgs)
17 Bitnet
18 Medical Servers (4 msgs)
19 GREEN CARD LOTTERY — THE FULL STORY (LONG) (30 msgs)

Enter Thread Number, MORE, ADD, ?, or EXIT: 7
```

When you see a topic that you're interested in, type the item number. I decided to read five messages about Internet regulatory issues, which was item #7 on my menu. Voilá! Instant Internet.

You can also ask Delphi to search for newsgroups on a specific topic. Going back to the first Usenet menu, I chose **Search for Newsgroups and Mailing Lists** and then **Search for Specific Newsgroups**. From there, I quickly found a newsgroup for cat lovers.

```
Search for Newsgroups and Mailing Lists
Page 1 of 1

1 Search for Specific Newsgroups (excludes alt. groups)  Search
2 Search Educator's Guide to E-Mail Lists                Search
3 Search Academic email lists (Kovacs)                   Search
4 Search Academic email lists (alt. Kovacs)              Search
5 Search Academic email lists (another approach)         Search

Enter Item Number, SAVE, ?, or BACK: 1

Please specify a word or words to search.

Search for: cats

Search for Specific Newsgroups (excludes alt. groups)

1 rec.pets.cats Text

Enter Item Number, SAVE, ?, or BACK: 1
```

Like America Online, Delphi lets you save a list of the newsgroups that interest you so that you can quickly access them at a later time. Once you find an interesting newsgroup, type the word **save**. Later, from the Usenet menu, you can select item #1 (**Personal Favorites**) to see a list of your favorite groups.

Delphi has two different membership plans. For more information, call Delphi's voice information line at (800) 695-4005.

UNIX

If you're using an Internet service provider like Netcom, the World or CRL, you should use a news reader software program to access newgroups. Rather than having just one interface, you have the opportunity to choose from dozens of different programs for reading Usenet news. The most popular news readers are called *rn, trn* and *tin*. Some are more complex than others. The programs that you can use depend on which system you're operating. Ask your system administrator which news readers are available to you. Here's a breakdown of the most popular news readers:

Readnews is one of the simplest news readers available, but its very simplicity makes it frustrating to use. It shows you each newsgroup one-by-one, and within each newsgroup, you see each article one-by-one. *Readnews* stops at each message and asks you to type **yes** or **no** according to whether you want to read it or not. It's a very slow process. To make matters worse, *Readnews*

can't automatically follow ongoing discussions ("threads"), making it virtually impossible for you to follow the conversation.

rn is a much more powerful program, but it's also more complicated than *Readnews*. It shows you lists of messages by subject and allows you to choose the messages that you want to read.

Three other news readers—***trn, nn*** and ***tin***—are quite powerful and flexible, and it's not easy to decide which is the best. *nn* selects articles to read on the basis of their subject headings. It recognizes all articles with the same subject and can then present them as a single menu item. *trn* and *tin* track threads of discussion based on who responds to which article.

Don't let all of these choices confuse you. If you want to keep it simple and can't decide which news reader to use, begin with *Readnews* or *rn*. After one or two weeks of using one of these, you can explore other news readers. If in doubt, try *trn*, my personal favorite.

Here's an example of what two newgroups—**alt.fan.laurie.anderson and alt.internet.services**—look like through *Readnews*.

```
Newsgroup alt.fan.laurie.anderson

Article 394 of 398, Fri 06:31.
Subject: Re: William S. Burroughs
From: steve@dusty.unet.umn.edu (Steve Fletty @ University
of Minnesota, Networking Services.)
(34 lines) More? [ynq] n

Article 395 of 398, Wed 04:35.
Subject: Re: Lovely Laurie
From: godes@decscc.tau.ac.il (Godes Shimon @ Tel-Aviv
University Computation Center)
(14 lines) More? [ynq] n

Article 398 of 398, Mon 16:16.
Subject: Laurie Anderson's _Nerve Bible_ book
From: C562611@mizzou1.missouri.edu (woody @ University of
Missouri, Columbia)
(17 lines) More? [ynq] n

Newsgroup alt.internet.services

Article 17557 of 17560, Wed 10:20.
Subject: Re: Stock quotes from the Internet
From: tdowling@lib.washington.edu (Thomas Dowling @ Uni-
versity
of Washington)
```

Next is an example of what the same newsgroups look like using *trn*.

```
n 6 unread articles in alt.fan.laurie.anderson-read now?
[+ynq]
n 24 unread articles in comp.infosystems.wais-read now? [+ynq]
y 4 unread articles in alt.internet.services-read now? [+ynq]
Reading overview file...
alt.internet.services     4 articles

a+Thomas Dowling  1 >Stock quotes from the Internet
b Dave Taylor     1 >The internet mall
d DaveHatunen     1 >Anonymous mail
e Rick Duffy      1 >How many people are on the Internet?
(Flame!!)
<Kathy: This goes a, b, d, e. Where is c? Should the a
really
be a+?>

-Select threads (date order)-All [Z>] -
```

Finally, the same two newsgroups through tin.

```
1 6 alt.fan.laurie.anderson Will it be a music conce
2 4 alt.internet.services Not available in the uuc
3 24 comp.infosystems.wais The Z39.50-based WAIS fu
4 15 alt.internet.talk-radio Carl Malamud's Internet
5 151 comp.sys.mac.hypercard The Macintosh Hypercard:
6 alt.radio.internet
7 5 alt.etext
8 a2i.announce
9 a2i.general
10 a2i.modems
11 news.announce.important General announcements of
12 news.announce.newusers Explanatory postings for
13 233 alt.config Alternative subnet discu
14 804 news.answers Repository for periodic
15 7 news.lists News-related statistics
16 42 news.misc Discussions of USENET it

<n>=set current to n, TAB=next unread, /=search pattern,
c)atchup, g)oto, j=line down, k=line up, h)elp, m)ove,
q)uit,r=toggle all/unread,
s)ubscribe, S)ub pattern, u)nsubscribe, U)nsub pattern,
y)ank in/out
Threading articles
Group Selection (77)      h=help
alt.fan.laurie.anderson (3T 6A 0K 0H R)          h=help

1 + Laurie Anderson's _Nerve Bible_ book          woody
2 + 3 Lovely Laurie Godes                        Shimon
3 + 2 William S. Burroughs                   Rob Hilton
```

OA

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